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Commencement address  
Ohio State University  
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A speaker at any commencement exercise, yes, even at so impressive a place as Ohio State, is expected to tell you all about going through the open doors into the bright and challenging new world. Then he's supposed to tell you why his generation has accomplished so much, what remains to be done and, these days, at least, wonder aloud why there is so little appreciation for the established scale of values among the young.

Sorry about that. All the talk about the generation gap was summed up for me the other night at a party when a gentleman from Cincinnati got to waxing eloquently on the subject.

"Where did we fail?" he demanded to know. "Where did our generation go wrong in raising our children? I'll tell you where we went wrong. We had them that's where we went wrong."

Which, when you get right down to it, is about all there is to say on the subject.

Your generation isn't very different from any other. The Saturday Review recently printed an excerpt from George Orwell's "The Road to Wigan Pier," in which Mr. Orwell in 1937 was reminiscing about his own younger years after World War I. Listen.

"Those years," he wrote, "were a queer time to be at school, for England was nearer revolution than she has been since or had been for a century earlier. Essentially, though of course one could not then see it in perspective, it was a revolt of

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youth against age, resulting directly from the war. In the war the young had been sacrificed and the old had behaved in a way which, even at this distance of time, is horrible to contemplate; they had been sternly patriotic in safe places while their sons went down like swathes of hay before the German machine guns.

"Moreover, the war had been conducted by old men and had been conducted with supreme incompetence. By 1918 everyone under 40 was in a bad temper with his elders, and the mood of anti-militarism which followed naturally upon the fighting was extended into the general revolt against orthodoxy and authority. At that time, among the young, there was a curious cult of hatred of 'old men.' The dominance of 'old men' was held to be responsible for every evil known to humanity, and every accepted institution from Scott's novels to the House of Lords was derided merely because 'old men' were in favor of it.

"At that time," Mr. Orwell went on, "we all thought of ourselves as enlightened creatures of a new age, casting off the orthodoxy that had been forced upon us by these detested 'old men.'...We derided the Officers Training Corps, the Christian religion, and perhaps even compulsory games and the Royal Family, and we did not realize that we were merely taking part in a worldwide gesture of distaste for war."

Thus endeth the Gospel according to George Orwell. To bring his comments up to date, substitute ROTC for Officers Training Corps and the Protestant ethic for the Christian religion.

If you are disappointed to learn that casting off the orthodoxy of old men is nothing new, then all of us should be

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disappointed to see how little we have succeeded in casting off that orthodoxy in the two generations since World War I.

Perhaps this time we'll do it better. Certainly the revolt of the youth of today has brought some of the genuine problems of this society sharply into focus. Certainly some of us are listening.

If we fail once more, it could be for any of several reasons. Though the young might dispute him today, George Orwell concluded that dissident students very shortly forget their dissatisfaction as they leave college to join the power structure. This is the greatest danger.

The second is that today's young never seem to have heard of George Santayana's comment that those who ignore the past are condemned to repeat it. Just as they think they are the first to revolt against old men, so they also forget the third of Newton's laws, that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, that violence begets violence, irrationality and intemperance beget further irrationality and intemperance. Those who attempt to use their liberty of free speech as a license to deny it to others, get tuned out by their elders who, in turn, turn off.

These are the minority among the under-30 majority. But too often we use handy labels instead of logic, and color the majority, the washed and lettered, with the hue and cry of the unwashed minority. It's too bad, because all of us have proved that so much is possible, yet so much remains to be done.



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Norman Macrae, writing in the London Economist this spring after an extensive study of the United States, wondered aloud if the United States might not blow all that it has accomplished, after having come so close.

We stand, he said, on the brink of something no other society in the history of the world has accomplished -- the elimination of hunger and poverty, the achievement of a good life for all. We are not there yet but, as he pointed out, even the median income of American Negro families is greater than the median income of all British families. We have the best of the world's tangible goods, and at the same time have embraced a national commitment that no one suffers starvation, that no one is denied medical help because of poverty, that no one is deprived of an education because he can't afford it.

Yet we are in danger of blowing the whole thing simply because of our alienation from each other.

Let us make no mistake about this alienation. The world you are going out into is a mess, a frightened, neurotic, gibbering mess. And there are few people out there who can help you, because all the people who are already out there have been there longer and a good number of them have given up looking for solutions and instead have become part of the problem.

I can think of no better examples of this than our present involvement in Vietnam or the fantastically absurd debates over the anti-ballistic missiles, the chemical and biological warfare deterrents and the monstrous concept known as MIRV, the method our military geniuses have devised to arm a Minuteman missile so it can pick off a dozen Russian cities at one time.

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The history of our involvement in Vietnam is the story of one gigantic error after another. For 24 years now the United States has had chance after chance to create a nation in Vietnam, a nation that would have been, by its very nature, its history and the temperament of its people, fiercely independent, rather than satellite, more Picasso dove gray than Chinese communist red.

And each time the United States has failed, more often than not because of our paranoid fear of communism and our childishly naive assumption that military might is the answer to social, political and economic problems.

Our paranoid fear led us to see a menace in Southeast Asia where what was rising was not communism but nationalism. It was a fear that caused us to support the despotic regime of Ngo Dinh Diem and his assorted successors against the aspirations of the Vietnamese people.

It was paranoid because it disclosed a basic lack of faith in the United States and in our form of government; a belief that a pyramid constructed of little lies serves the nation better than one big truth, and a fear that democracy cannot compete in the marketplace of ideas with communism, but must, rather, compete on battlefields and in strategic warrooms.

As of now, I cannot predict the future of Vietnam. Perhaps there is a solution, but it will be a far more difficult, painful and expensive solution than what we could have had a generation ago, simply because our believability has been destroyed by lies and napalm, and too many earlier political opportunities have been irrevocably lost.

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What bothers me now is that we seem to have learned so little from our past mistakes and by our very insistence on propagating them. The country has said loudly and often, "No more Vietnams," but we rush headlong into trying to create new ones of even more awesome dimensions.

While all our experts, scientific and humanitarian, tell us that a big war is not only unwinnable but suicidal, we think of big wars and plan for big wars and design big wars and drain our nation of every extra penny of treasure to make these weapons which we admit will destroy us.

Russell Baker, the resident humorist for the New York Times, delivered himself of a piece of black humor the other day when, with what he called the kind of folk wisdom deplored by strategic thinkers, he thought about MIRV.

Folk Wisdom Law No. One, he wrote, is that in America today when a vast engineering project like MIRV becomes possible it also becomes inevitable. MIRV there will be, and after MIRV will come HEWT or MYRT or MARGE, and if some bungler doesn't wire something wrong and blow up the Treasury we can surely count some day on seeing a fully deployed JOEY.

Strategic thinkers will laugh. But afterwards they will go to their computers for a reason why JOEY is the only system that will enable us to sleep soundly at night.

This is the test of whether you have folk wisdom or strategic concept wisdom. Answer honestly: Did you really sleep better last night knowing that we now have a chance to preserve several underground silos in Montana and South Dakota if the rest



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of the United States is obliterated in a nuclear attack?

This, I think, is why Mr. Macrae wonders whether we might blow it. We recognize that a nuclear war is inconceivable, then spend billions of dollars and astronomical amounts of talent to build nuclear holocausts to keep holocausts from happening. We think the absurd in order to prevent the inconceivable. We create the absurd in order not to think about the unthinkable.

I cannot guess how many milleniums ago it was when a man picked up fire and it burned him and he picked it up again and it burned a forest. And he brought it home and it burned his shelter and he threw it on a pile of bones and learned to cook.

Then he found a piece of shining metal under the bonfire and he wore it for awhile and then hammered it into a cutting edge.

It took him hundreds of thousands of years to get used to fire. The very concept was so frightening he refused to think about it. He called it a god or the property of a god, and it took him hundreds of thousands of years to evolve a set of rules and techniques and mores for thinking about fire.

After that he loved it and it was the first lord of his hearth. More people got warm than got burned and so he gradually began to think about and find out what made it do the things it does.

Meanwhile there must have been many men who, seeing a forest burning, shrieked out that the devil would destroy the world.

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This is what has happened to us. The expanding universe concept tumbled our homocentric galaxy; the fissionable atom blew our fire-minded world to smithereens. Landing men on the moon so boggled our imaginations that all we can think of is to use our new-found knowledge and power to put men on Mars, or to double the input-output factors of a spy satellite.

We are disturbed. The world is changing around us and we would rather look away from it than at it. We preen ourselves on what we have accomplished here on earth in the past yet we are afraid to stretch ourselves into the unknown future. We refuse to overturn in our minds what facts have already overturned for us: That there cannot be any more big wars, that man-made boundaries are obsolete, that we are not only our brother's keeper but our brother's brother.

I wonder how long it will take us -- the older generation which shies away from problems, the younger generation which offers no solutions -- to accept what is so and to say to ourselves, "Well, that was a good phase, but it's over?"

Wouldn't it be wonderful if some day, in our time if possible, we would look at the world around us and say -- and be heard saying it -- "This was once true but it no longer is true. We must make new rules. We must abandon our dear wars, our fears and our precious hatreds which once served a purpose but no longer do?" Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could greet this new beginning with wonder rather than despair?

This, ladies and gentlemen, is what the whole bag is all about. If what the younger generation has been saying about the older generation is true, then some day you might look back, like George



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Orwell, and say what a weird time it was back in 1969 when some  
dolt broiling under a mortarboard suggested that Vietnam was a  
lie to keep from thinking and MIRV was a creation of maniacal Dr.  
Strangeloves.

It could happen, you know, because you, as graduates,  
masters and doctors, are full grown men and women leaving the  
warm nest of Ohio State University. You are now full-fledged  
members of the power structure. On behalf of those who have been  
here awhile, welcome to the Establishment. May you shake it up  
with common sense as well as erudition.